11/30/07 Guillory, from Cultural Capital: “The Problem of Literary Canon Formation”

• drafts: don’t let your sources take over your argument!
  • So far, we’ve been tracing a progression roughly mirroring the historical changes in the canon.
    • started with 2 critics who support the traditional view that what we should look for in literature is excellence; one defines the criteria which determine excellence, while the other deliberately avoids doing so and tries to identify it inductively by the "touchstone" method. The views of both probably imply relatively limited canons, albeit for different reasons and in different ways.
    • referred back to a first-order challenge to the traditional canon, Kolodny, which argued that the logic supporting the traditional canon is circular and self-perpetuating.
    • went to a 2nd order critique by a black woman of the canons derived from the first-order critiques of black men and white feminists, which also contains either a third-order critique or a third second-order critique on the grounds of sexual preference.
  • for all their disagreements, all of the afore-mentioned can be reconciled with the idea the one should concentrate on the best literature; we therefore looked at an article examining in sophisticated ways Superman comics, for which no claim of excellence is made.
• What I have mentioned but we haven’t looked at in this historical progression is the backlash against all this by cultural conservatives in the 1990’s. From the article you read for today, however, you can see a simplified version of how the battle lines were drawn: on the one side, conservatives arguing that the radicals had decimated the canon, abandoning the Western tradition and all the values that give us our cultural identity, and on the other, multiculturalists arguing that because we are a diverse society and indeed a global community we need to expand the canon to include the full range of voices.
  • This debate was never settled and no side could be said to have won. It is much less prevalent than it was, in part because in this decade there have been genuine life or death issues to get upset about.
  • What Guillory brings to this discussion is an argument that both sides are missing what’s actually going on. Both sides, he argues, assume that a university curriculum can pass on something like a "national culture," when in fact it can do no such thing: a culture is an immensely complex thing, which one has to live with, live in and just live in order to possess. A small number of literary and philosophical texts cannot possibly reflect, much less pass on, a culture. What is passed on is a school culture, or what he calls cultural capital. By this he means knowledge, but knowledge with particular connotations: knowledge as something that you own and that you can invest in society for personal profit in a broad, partly metaphorical sense. Cultural capital has everything to do with class status: while the educational system thinks it is passing on a national culture, what it is really doing is "the differential tracking of students according to class or the possession of cultural capital" (1472). It is worth saying, because it isn’t obvious from this article, that Guillory is not suggesting that knowledge has NO value apart from its value as markers of class status. There are various places in the article where he suggests that knowledge has a great deal of value in its own right. But he isn’t trying to address that kind of intrinsic value in this article.

Both the traditional canon and the multicultural canon are cultural capital in this sense, because both are a part of school culture that marks a person as educated, and moreover, Guillory argues, they are cultural capital of the same kind. Seeing them in opposition to one another masks the real threat, which is that professional and technical
knowledge has steadily gained in value as cultural capital: "the division now characterizing the humanities syllabus--between Western and multicultural, canonical and noncanonical, hegemonic and non-hegemonic works--is the symptom of a more historically significant split between two kinds of cultural capital, one of which is "traditional," the other organic to the constitution of the professional-managerial class" (1477). Earlier, he says, "It has proven to be much easier to quarrel about the content of the curriculum that to confront the implications of a fully emergent professional-managerial class which no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie" (1477).

- What we're going to do: we're going to play a completely unfair game. We will divide the class into four groups of people. One group will consist of those whose cultural capital is that of the "Western tradition"; a second group will consist of those whose cultural capital is multicultural (which doesn't mean that you have NO traditional texts, that's just not your whole focus), the third will consist of those whose cultural capital consists of professional, technical, or managerial knowledge. The fourth group, who we'll just call "society," acts as the judge.
- The groups will spend 10-15 minutes or so in discussion. The first three groups should discuss the value of their cultural capital:
  - given your particular education, what kind of knowledge are you likely to have?
  - what is that knowledge good for? For example, what does knowledge of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and the like DO for a person such that he or she can expect to be a successful and contributing member of society?
  - Come up with as many positive values as you can for your particular brand of knowledge.
- The society group, meanwhile, will discuss what they want to reward. What makes you function, society, and/or what allows a person to succeed in you?

- When we get to the game proper, all three groups will start on one side of the room (or, if you're feeling lazy, we can make a game board on the board). In each turn, each of the first three groups will identify one thing that their cultural capital has to offer. Once society has heard the three groups, it will decide how many steps to give each group. There is no minimum or maximum number of steps that it has to award, although they should take account of the space available in the room. During the next turn, each group identifies another positive value that their group has to offer. And so on. Whoever is furthest ahead at the end of the hour wins.